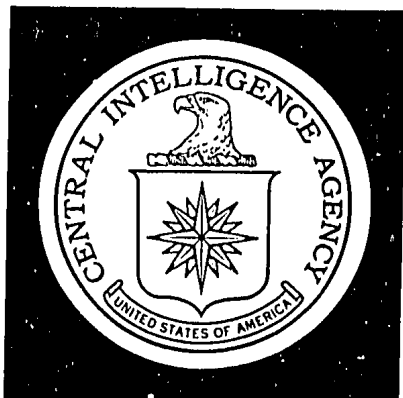


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DIRECTORATE OF
INTELLIGENCE

WEEKLY SUMMARY

Special Report

The Thieu Government and Students Militant

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THE THIEU GOVERNMENT AND STUDENTS MILITANT

For more than a year now, militant students in South Vietnam have led outbreaks of student activism that have caused the government serious concern. Student protests have focused public attention on controversial issues such as taxes, rising living costs, and peace, as well as on Saigon's governmental shortcomings. In addition, student disorders have tended to distract the police from their important function of ferreting out Communist operations in the cities. Never at any time in the past year, however, have the student protests seriously threatened the stability of the Thieu regime. Saigon has managed to keep the various demonstrations from getting out of hand, often with brutal and harsh tactics, followed up by enough concessions to help quiet the students temporarily. The basic disinterest of most students in political agitation has also proved a boon to the government.

Nevertheless, extremist students remain eager to confront the authorities by exploiting any usable issue; for example, the recent shooting of a youth by US guards provoked a wave of anti-American demonstrations in Qui Nhon. Toward this end, the students are encouraged by both the Communists and legal opposition groups desirous of embarrassing President Thieu. None of these politically motivated forces seems to exercise any significant degree of control over student activity at the present time, but the Communists, who have shifted to a greater emphasis on political warfare, can in the future be expected to accelerate their efforts to spur unrest among the students.

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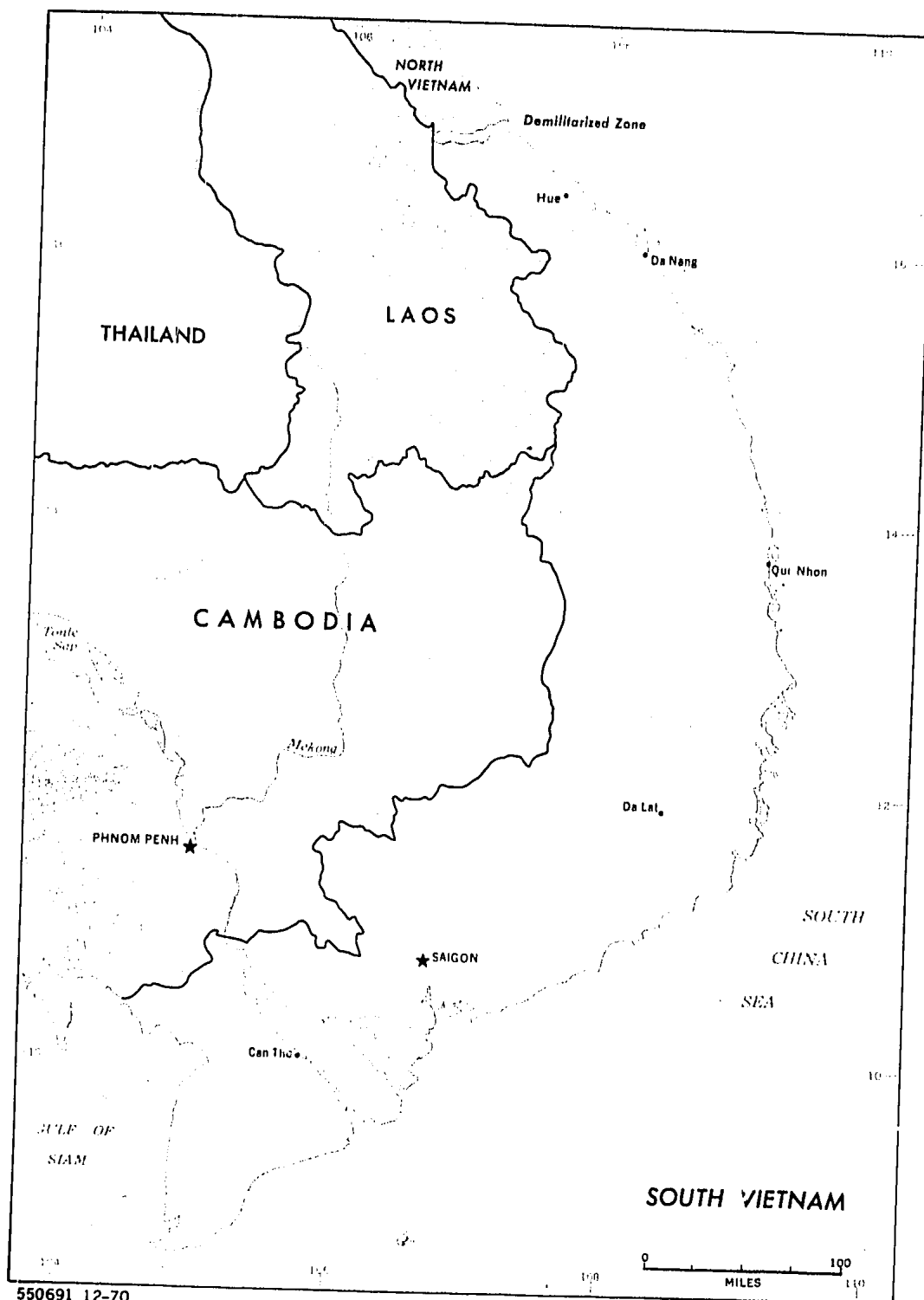
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The Beginnings of Activism

There are five universities in South Vietnam, with an enrollment of upwards of 40,000 students. Saigon University is by far the largest, with 30,000 students, while the state-supported universities of Hue and Can Tho have about 3,000 and 2,000 students, respectively. The Catholic university at Da Lat in Tuyen Duc Province and Buddhist-run Van Hanh University in Saigon each have about 2,500 students. Despite the many shortcomings of the school system, such as poor academic standards and inadequate facilities, there have been practically no student protests against it except for demands for instruction in Vietnamese.

Student involvement on the political scene was launched by the An Quang Buddhist movement to oust Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963, when militant students emerged as an action arm of the movement during the government raids against Buddhist pagodas in Hue and Saigon. Even though martial law was declared, student unrest continued with such intensity that 1,400 students were arrested in late August of 1963 and another 2,400 were detained in early September of that year.

After Diem's death, students remained in groups associated with various religious and political factions. Violent student demonstrations—usually spurred on by the Buddhists—were instrumental in forcing Prime Minister Khanh out of office in August 1964 and continued to plague subsequent regimes. Resumption of military rule in 1965 temporarily held the Buddhists and students in check, but they again erupted in a frenzy of protest against General Thi's dismissal as commander of I Corps. The Buddhist "struggle movement" quickly developed a strong anti-American tenor as militant students burned the US Consulate in Da Nang and the USIS library in Hue. Political agitation subsided after the struggle movement was quashed by the government and did not again become a serious problem until the disorders of 1970.

Student Organizations

Students have generally tended to stay out of extracurricular activities, especially in view of the government's stern measures against agitators. The only important organization in the universities are the student unions—theoretically representing the entire student body—whose executive committee constitutes the highest level of student government. This committee is elected by the student council of the university, which includes representatives of the student councils of each faculty.

Of these, the Saigon Student Union (SSU) is the only significant one at present, and even so it rarely generates widespread student support and is almost exclusively used as a vehicle for a small minority of student activists. Although SSU leaders directed a number of the demonstrations last spring and summer, several were led by ad hoc committees of radical mavericks within the SSU. A prime example of this was the high school "honda demonstrations" against Cambodian mistreatment of Vietnamese residents, which were organized by an SSU officer but were not under SSU control.

The Catholics and An Quang Buddhists each have separate student organizations associated with the churches rather than with the universities. The Catholic student organizations have stayed out of the recent struggle movement entirely. Although Buddhist students have been active in all the recent protests, the An Quang has tried to restrain the extremists and has virtually stifled student politics in Hue. A number of politicians have lent support to various student groups and have tried to channel their activities in support of particular objectives, but no political figure has developed any lasting influence among the students.

Vietnamese students have no national organization and have had little contact with foreign student organizations. In the past year,

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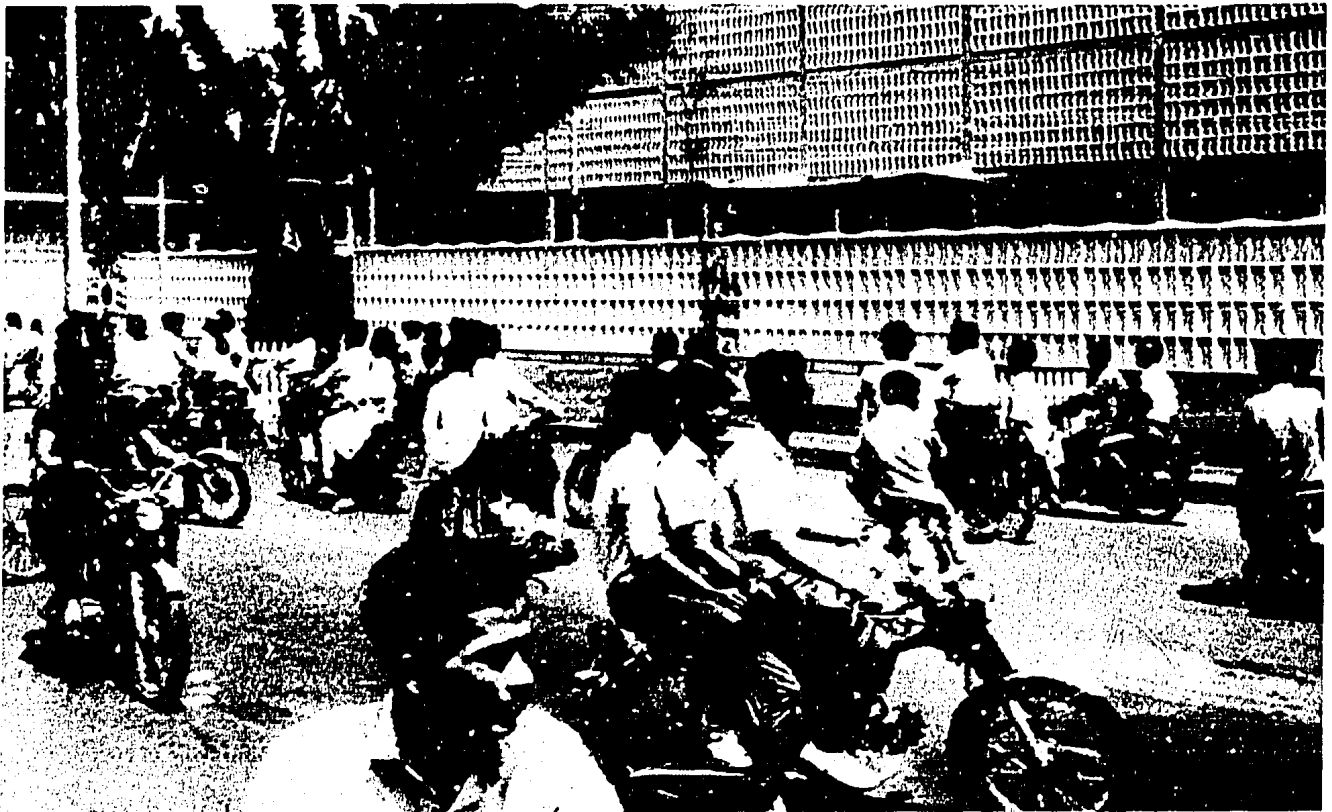
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In Front of the US Embassy

however, the SSU has corresponded with several US peace groups.

Students and the Communists

Students have long been a priority target for Viet Cong penetration and recruitment. The extent of this influence is difficult to estimate but seems to have been substantial in some instances. In the An Quang Buddhist struggle movement in 1966, the Communists apparently had permeated the movement in Da Nang and were quite influential in Hue. During the Tet offensive of 1968, students and other youths were used to carry and cache weapons, guide enemy troops into the major cities, and recruit among the public as part of the "general uprising." Sizable groups of students reportedly were taken to base areas during

the immediate post-Tet period for political and military training, and several groups of students operating as armed propaganda cadres were arrested in Saigon during the spring of 1968. The chairman of the SSU defected to the Communist-sponsored Alliance for National, Democratic and Peace Forces in 1968 and has been sentenced to death in absentia by a government court. Other students were sympathetic to the Alliance but hesitated to support it openly.

Since the failure of the general military offensives, the Communists have been more careful about exposing their assets. There are indications that they are trying to develop a covert agent net among the students, but if they are having any success, they are keeping it well concealed. A police raid in September 1968 found enemy

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documents at the headquarters of the SSU, but it is questionable that the SSU staff knew they were there. A more serious indication of Communist inroads was produced by the arrest of 40 persons in March 1970 as members of the Student and Youth Section of the Viet Cong Saigon City Committee. Among those arrested was Huynh Tan Mam, then acting chairman of the SSU, who admitted knowing students associated with the Viet Cong but denied that he had engaged in Viet Cong activities. The evidence of Mam's complicity with the enemy seemed damaging but was never conclusive. Mam was found with a letter from the Viet Cong Saigon Student and Youth Section requesting a meeting. Another student claimed that he had seen Mam at a meeting at a Viet Cong secret base, though many non-Communist youths have been taken to bases for lectures.

Thus, the Communists seem to be trying to exploit student dissension and even to give it impetus, although it is unlikely they are having much success. Most students, despite their dislike of the government, do not appear to view the Communists as an acceptable alternative and are probably aware of the regimented life the Viet Cong would impose. The principal danger thus lies in the ability of covert Communist agents to gain positions from which they could provoke the militants into disruptive actions. These in turn could give a push to political instability in the nation or prompt increasing repressiveness on the part of the government.

What Moves the Students

The militants in South Vietnamese universities are quick to seize on any issue that has aroused, or seems likely to arouse, the public's interest as a focus for demonstrations. There are several genuine problems, however, directly concerning the universities that are continuing sources of serious friction between the student community and the government. The compulsory military training program for university students is one. Even the most moderate students oppose this program, which is poorly organized, limited

in content, and time consuming. Graduates going into the service receive no credit for completing the program, and they must also take basic training when they actually enter the service. In addition, students claim that the summer training schedule reduces the time available to prepare for their final exams.

University autonomy, another popular issue, does not generate the same degree of feeling as student military training. Militant demands in the name of autonomy vary but usually include an end to all government interference with student activities on the campuses. During the past year, student leaders have pressed specifically for official recognition of the SSU, government provision of a new headquarters for the SSU, and legal codification of university statutes.

Vietnamese students, like the majority of Vietnamese youth, do not want to serve in the armed forces and naturally are eager for the war to end. These sentiments were reflected in their call for negotiations in mid-1968 and on other occasions. In general, however, student opposition to the war has been restrained, no doubt out of fear of government reprisals, but also because few students accept the alternative of Communist rule.

Student militants also have seized on problems outside the campus as excuses for taking to the streets. The country's economic difficulties, veterans' benefits, and Vietnamese assistance to the Lon Nol regime in Cambodia have all been used as launching pads for the youthful protestors; none of these has drawn widespread student involvement.

Elements of anti-Americanism have occasionally crept into the dialogue of the protestors. This has been more noticeable in Hue and Da Nang over the years and reflects the intensely nationalistic sentiment prevalent in central Vietnam, but it has also become increasingly noticeable in Saigon. The Vietnamese tend to take a conspiratorial view of politics, and many profess

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to see obscure American plots behind decisions of the Saigon government. The students have often reflected a sensitivity felt by many Vietnamese that the United States is an unwanted foreign influence in their internal affairs, though they still seem to accept the need for American military assistance. As US military assistance diminishes, however, the Vietnamese probably will be less restrained about criticizing the irritating aspects of the American presence in their country. The latent xenophobia of many Vietnamese, including the students, could be sparked at any time by incidents such as the Qui Nhon shooting and could take on overtones increasingly hostile to the United States.

What the Students Have Been Up to Lately

The Vietnamese authorities were startled and angered by the number of students involved

in Communist proselyting activities in Saigon and Hue during the 1968 Tet offensive. As a result the police cracked down hard on student political activities during the 1968-69 school year. After the SSU chairman went over to the Communists, union headquarters were seized and closed, and official recognition of the SSU was temporarily withdrawn, so that all its activities would be technically illegal. The following summer the government dealt firmly with attempts by some students to boycott military training, surrounding the demonstrators and trucking them directly to the training camp. The government proved itself not totally insensitive to the students' plight, however, by rearranging the examination schedule to allow more time for studying after training ended. Several student leaders were arrested in late December 1969 for demonstrating against the government, although there appeared to be no connection between the students and the Communists.



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The arrests of members of the Viet Cong's Student and Youth Section in Saigon in March 1970 came at a time when the students were already aroused over increases in newsprint taxes and school fees. The resulting boycott of classes gradually spread to other universities as well as to some high schools. Although many students believed that Huynh Tan Mam might be involved with the Viet Cong, others suspected the police of fabricating the issue in order to destroy the SSU.

Student dissent continued to percolate throughout the spring as the students leapfrogged from one issue to another to seize opportunities for thumping the government. The massacres among the Vietnamese minority in Cambodia kicked off more militant protests in the latter part of April.

The government proved itself flexible in dealing with this resurgence of student militancy. Open dissension was met with harsh and sometimes brutal treatment, but then followed by concessions designed to defuse the issues that attracted student support to the militant leaders. Some of the sanctions applied by the government—such as arrests and loss of draft deferments—undoubtedly discouraged many students who might otherwise have joined the militants. Instances of police brutality, however, generated widespread support for the militants, even among more moderate students, and fed the basic hostility between the campus and the palace. A notable example was the outraged reaction that occurred when several students who had been tortured by the police had to be carried into court on stretchers after the March 1970 arrests. The government became more circumspect in handling the student problem after that.

The increasingly disruptive demonstrations in the spring and summer were treated with remarkable tolerance, and the government made a number of concessions that dealt with several long-standing issues. It recognized the SSU and made a building available for its headquarters. A bill codifying the university statutes was presented to the Assembly.

This relatively conciliatory official attitude only seemed to encourage the militants to progressive boldness, however, until the government was finally forced to close all schools and universities in Saigon on 6 May and arrest a number of militant leaders. These tactics put a temporary damper on student disorders, although militant students again took to the streets in mid-June, despite the release of Huynh Tan Mam on 13 June after his trial by a military court was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court. But there was no real issue this time, and the protests sputtered out from lack of support.

The militancy of the student demonstrations of the past year was probably influenced by the general atmosphere of unrest in the country. Serious economic problems have been plaguing urban residents. Veterans' demands for increased benefits during the spring and summer became increasingly violent and eventually caused a backlash that caught the students as well. Faced with growing turmoil in Saigon and elsewhere, the government decided to crack down on all demonstrations and authorized the police to use any force necessary to put down disturbances.

A violent demonstration on 30 August against the summer military training program resulted in wholesale arrests. As in the past, most of those arrested were quickly released, but the leaders were imprisoned, including Mam for the second time. Although government officials initially vowed their determination to bring the student leaders to trial, they were again released on probation after university authorities petitioned President Thieu and promised to control the students in the future.

Outlook

The government has managed to defuse or cushion the impact of student opposition, which nevertheless will continue to harass the Thieu regime in the months ahead. Military training and peace are issues that radical leaders can exploit at almost any suitable opportunity, and continued

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inflation could produce an atmosphere of unrest conducive to student excesses. The militants will no doubt be ready to seize any issue of the moment as well. The recent shooting of a boy in Qui Nhon city by American soldiers was promptly protested by the SSU, which has threatened to exploit the incident in an anti-American campaign. Nevertheless, even though these issues have broad appeal among the students, large numbers of them are not likely to be willing to take the risks of open confrontation unless a particular situation or a combination of adverse conditions seriously worsens. Regarding one specific issue, however, the upcoming campaign for the 1971 presidential election provides an occasion for the students to dramatize their opposition to the regime, and the militants may well try to inject an element of extremism into the campaign.

In the long run, of course, there is the dangerous possibility that the Communists may gain control of a radical student element that could exploit the many problems facing the government and stimulate serious urban turmoil, with sporadic agitation on its own or in conjunction with labor and other disaffected groups. Although this prospect at present seems unlikely, it remains a major goal of the Communists if the war develops into a basically political conflict. Equally dangerous, however, would be violent agitation by students not responding to Communist direction but nevertheless creating a disruptive situation advantageous to the Communists and harmful to the stability and unity of the country.

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The Current Target



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